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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME IMMEDIATE 0305  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 2266  
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000902

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: SEARCH FOR LAST RED CROSS HOSTAGE CONTINUES

REF: A. MANILA 829 SWISS HOSTAGE GAINS FREEDOM)  
[1](#)B. MANILA 812 (HOSTAGES: PURSUING NEGOTIATIONS BUT  
PREPARING FOR WORST)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Despite recent rumors that the sole remaining Red Cross hostage may have been abandoned by his Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) kidnappers, cabinet-level sources believe Red Cross worker Eugenio Vagni is still being held by his captors in the jungle area around the town of Indanan on Jolo island. The Philippine government announced a monetary reward for information on Vagni's location and authorized the military to conduct rescue operations. Press reports noted that Vagni suffers from a painful hernia that may have slowed his movements, making him a liability for the ASG as it flees intensive military patrols. However, the lack of actionable intelligence and the refusal of the two former Red Cross hostages to cooperate with Philippine authorities have hampered efforts to ascertain Vagni's exact location. The Philippine government has lost contact with the ASG kidnappers, but five Ulama (Muslim clerics) in Jolo are in communication with the ASG and are working for Vagni's safe release. At a one-on-one breakfast with Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo April 27 (septel), the Ambassador expressed the hope that the crisis would end quickly and peacefully and called attention to the importance of restoring the confidence of Jolo civilians in their government's ability to provide for their security. END SUMMARY.

EMBOLDENED ASG?  
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[1](#)2. (C) Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo told the Ambassador at a one-on-one breakfast April 27 that he hopes the hostage crisis will be resolved soon, but acknowledged that this kidnapping episode had already emboldened the ASG. Secretary Romulo emphasized the importance of U.S.-Philippine cooperation to prevent the ASG from committing this kind of crime again. The Ambassador suggested that the Philippine government, in its response to the ASG, should keep in mind the need to restore civilian confidence in the government's ability to provide security, as well as restore confidence in the decision-making authority of the Philippine military. The Ambassador expressed deep concern for Vagni's safety and said the U.S. continued to hope for his swift and safe release.

FALSE HOPES OF RELEASE  
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[1](#)3. (C) Unconfirmed press reports emerged late April 23 that

the remaining International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hostage, 62-year old Italian national Eugenio Vagni, was abandoned by his captors, although his whereabouts remained unknown. The reports noted that Vagni suffered from a painful hernia that may have impeded his ability to keep pace with the kidnappers. Department of the Interior Assistant Secretary Brian Yamsuan said that Philippine troops had not seen Vagni in recent encounters with ASG, leading Yamsuan to speculate that ASG terrorists had left him behind in their haste to elude the military's increasing pressure. Philippine National Police Director General Jesus Verzosa said that police were attempting to confirm such reports, and noted that the government was offering a 500,000 Peso (USD 10,300) reward for information on Vagni's exact location.

MILITARY CONTINUING ITS SEARCH  
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14. (C) Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno speculated that Vagni's condition could prevent him from walking, and that he might be holed-up with his captors in a jungle hut near the town of Indanan. Secretary Puno said the search for Vagni was impeded by the lack of cooperation from the two former ICRC hostages, who refused to share information about where the ASG might be hiding the Italian hostage. Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines (JSOTF-P) reported that the Philippine military, to fill a void of actionable intelligence, is sending agents to areas in western Jolo to collect intelligence on the ASG, confirm Vagni's location, and prepare for offensive operations. Hostage crisis spokesperson Lt. Colonel Edgard Arevalo said that Vagni's

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health condition may complicate any military rescue operation if he is unable to run from his captors during the initial confusion of a rescue attempt. Arevalo stipulated that a military operation would have to be carefully planned to account for Vagni's poor health.  
KENNEY